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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the experiences of a collaborative approach to the intense educational development involved in the transition to a successful technology-facilitated off-campus study program. Drawing on a history of many years of collaboration between the Australian National University (ANU) educational development center (CEDAM) and the Legal Workshop (LW) group in the Faculty of Law, the project spanned a 12-month academic year development period in 2001. The study program is a Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice (GDLP), taken by more than 150 students per year from all over Australia as well as overseas, many of whom are employed in a wide range of work environments. There are some 15 separate courses of study. The institutional context is highly research intensive and gives emphasis to an on-campus education. Recently, however, the University has begun actively exploring distributed and flexible approaches in niche settings, which permit it to better meet changing national and student needs. This paper highlights some of the lessons learned from the experience of undertaking one particular program level change, and in supporting academic and other staff during the transition to a technology-facilitated curriculum. (Author)

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Coaching the transition to e-learning: re-thinking instructional design

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> 'There is not a simple "experiment" that involves pitting distance and on-campus education against one another to determine which is "better". The question basically is what is the best way to deliver different facets of an educational program. In many instances the answer will likely involve a mixed combination of synchronous and asynchronous experiences for both on- and off-campus programs.'
>
> 'The innovation opportunities of distributed learning involve both delivery and learning methodology. At present, technology appears to be driving many adaptations, and not many research faculty are involved in educational research and development. Educational objectives would be advanced if this trend were reversed and problems were formulated before a technological solution was sought and more funding were available to support the needed educational research.'
>
> (US Council of Graduate Schools, Policy Statement on 'Distance Graduate Education: opportunities and challenges for the 21st century': 1998, p18.)

Introduction

This paper reviews the experiences of a collaborative approach to the intense educational development involved in the transition to a successful technology-facilitated off-campus study program. Drawing on a history of many years of collaboration between the ANU educational development centre (CEDAM) and the Legal Workshop (LW) group in the Faculty of Law, the project spanned a 12-month academic year development period in 2001. The study program is a Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice (GDLP), taken by more than 150 students per year from all over Australia as well as overseas, many of whom are employed in a wide range of work environments. There are some 15 separate courses of study.

The institutional context is highly research intensive and gives emphasis to an on-campus education. Recently, however, the University has begun actively exploring distributed and flexible approaches in niche settings (such as that represented by the GDLP) which permit it to better meet changing national and student needs. This paper highlights some of the lessons learned from the experience of undertaking one particular program level change, and in supporting academic and other staff during the transition to a technology-facilitated curriculum.

The project plan: purpose and expected outcomes

The project was multifaceted. One purpose was to evaluate the experience of re-developing GDLP courses within a *WebCT* environment and, in particular, to comment on the specific mix of different types of staff (and, to some extent, student) support that experience suggested was required. The project was set up as a cooperative undertaking between the Faculty of Law and CEDAM, and was intended to provide feedback on six areas of broad interest within the broader University:

- Academic leadership and management: program and project level
- Curriculum design and course development
- Student and staff support
- Quality enhancement and quality assurance
- Technology infrastructure
- Library and student administration

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Questions of interest associated with *Curriculum design and course development* included:

- what particular staff-student and student-student interactions are valued by students and support their learning? (eg what role is played by student-student discussion, peer support, cohort groups, technology mediated lecturing, role modelling, etc)
- what are some of the ways of meeting examination and student assessment requirements in technology-enabled flexible courses?
- what role is played by team- or group-work in the course design and development process and how is this best facilitated?

Some observations and findings addressing each of these questions are presented below, following a brief description of the overall structure of the project.

Project structure

Late in 2000 a project officer (learning design support trainee consultant) was appointed to a hybrid position comprising both workplace and study responsibilities. In part, the position description drew on ideas articulated by Laurillard (1993) and Walker et al., 1995) and read as follows:

> The position would suit a recent graduate who has some familiarity with the concept of instructional design…
>
> The intention is *not* so much to provide an instructional design service for areas, rather it is to facilitate areas' capacities to re-think teaching practice and re-invigorate course provision in ways which draw on instructional design concepts *and* reinforce the ethos of a research-led institution. The aim is to move beyond classical instructional design models *and* exploit opportunities opened up by new technologies. It is expected that a component of the study program will investigate the extent to which this aim is achieved, and what factors influenced the outcome.

By far the main responsibility (and most time consuming component of the workload) involved one-on-one consulting with instructors in LW who were redesigning and redeveloping courses for access by students off-campus through *WebCT*. A key principle informing the advice to instructors, is that of *alignment* of curriculum goals, student activities and assessment, explained by Biggs (1999). The project officer was required to undertake an 'online' postgraduate study program in order to gain first-hand experience of a student perspective in such an environment. The assumption was that this would assist in yielding realistic and high value consulting advice.

In addition to consulting and coaching activities for course development, there were two other significant areas of activity: program-level support, and project management. Program level support comprised periodic peer review workshops involving all LW instructors and, along with the project officer and myself. Project management involved an informal steering group comprised of the Director, LW, and myself. Project management also required substantial CEDAM-based professional support in the form of 'consultant debriefing' throughout the year, most of which I undertook. This provided a structure and impetus for continuous reflection and improvement. It yielded substantial insights into many strengths and weaknesses of both the teaching innovations being trialled by LW instructors, and our own CEDAM strategies for managing and supporting the consulting process. The more substantive 'learnings' were 'logged' in the form of a set of project-level notes compiled on a needs basis throughout the year by both the project officer and myself. These notes subsequently formed the basis for much of the internal ANU project report, which detailed a response under each of the six broad areas of interest identified above (Trevitt, 2002).

Curriculum design and educational development: some observations and findings

- *what particular staff-student and student-student interactions are valued by students and support their learning? (eg what role is played by student-student discussion, peer support, cohort groups, technology mediated lecturing, role modelling, etc)*

Technology-mediated discussions are a central feature in a number of GDLP courses. Both voice (teleconference) and text (electronic discussion boards) is used extensively.

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Telephone interviews have been used for a number of years. These represent an authentic setting for graduate lawyers wanting to be certified to practise. Mock exercises are run requiring students to give advice to instructors acting as 'clients', and are assessable. They also provide instructors with an early opportunity to learn of any student concerns and help allay fears, correct any misconceptions about course expectations, etc, and enables students to seek any early reassurance required.

Asynchronous discussions (eg using the *WebCT* Discussion Board Tool) rather than chat room type exchanges (which require two or more people to be online at the same time) have been used very successfully. Creating a clear and relevant context (and purpose) motivated students to engage in discussion and helped ensure success. The importance of issuing specific and unambiguous instructions cannot be overemphasised. Students are not necessarily adept at picking up all the nuances about instructor expectations at the best of times, let alone when they are located remotely 'at the end of a wire'.

The two boxes below illustrate different examples of the way in which technology -enabled discussions can be employed.

In the *Skills Development* course being conducted in 2002 instructions to students read, in part, as follows.

Skills Development

Participate via the Discussion Board in sharing your reflections with other students

Post to your group's Discussion Board at least five times on five different topics (not including the compulsory topic one tutorial activity)

- I'm looking for insightful postings that demonstrate a creative approach to problem-solving in the skills area involved. I'm looking for energy in your continued professional development and a mentor approach to learning where your new found knowledge and practical experience enhances the whole profession as you share your reflections with others.
- 250 words is the recommended length.
- topics remain open for a week from Sunday night until Sunday night.

A turn as group leader (or e-moderator) summarising your group's postings for the week and posting that summary to the Main Discussion Board by midnight Tuesday of the week following the topic.

- Click below for some ideas on e-moderating:
  http://www.e-moderators.com/moderators/artonlinehost.html
- I'm looking for a 500 word reflective posting from the group leader that picks out the main threads of the group's postings and enunciates this clearly. The leader should identify common themes and weave the threads together into a posting offering a practical solution to dilemmas others have posed and some constructive critical analysis where appropriate.
- Click on calender to find out in which week you are the leader.

These instructions give students a general overview of expectations. They help set the scene, and communicate the key criteria for success. Other, more specific instructions were subsequently issued to guide the weekly discussion on each topic.

In a second course, *Civil Practice,* the use of technology -enabled discussions demonstrates a somewhat more complex – but still very workable - approach to this sort of application of *Problem-Based Learning* principles to promote student learning. This example highlights the powerful motivation associated with authentic assessment activities that have been carefully aligned with course learning objectives. In 2001, exchanges associated with this mock legal case yielded 634 messages from 23 students and one instructor during a period of approximately 8 weeks.

Civil Practice

Students in the *Civil Practice* course were arranged into groups of 3 or 4 and asked to act for the Plaintiff or Defendant in a mock case. There were 3 pairs of Plaintiff-Defendant groups. Students used different discussion groups for different purposes. For example, group members developed their case and communicated with one another using a private Defendant or Plaintiff group. (Only group members can access postings to group discussions designated as 'private'). All students acting for the Plaintiff (Defendant) were eligible to communicate with one another using a general Plaintiff (Defendant) discussion forum. In addition, they had access to discussion forums known as *The Locker Room* or *The Court Registry*. Copies of descriptions of the purpose and function of these two discussion areas offered by the lecturer in charge are given below.

The Locker Room	The Court Registry
The Locker Room is where we discuss team issues. There are a number of different elements to working effectively in teams. There will be three formal discussion periods in the locker room. One starts now (June 8). The next will be at about 10 July and the final in the last week (July 23) of the course. Your participation in all three form part of your assessment.	The Court Registry is where you need to file your documents which form part of the case file. It is NOT where any discussions take place. When your group has a document which must be sent to the other side (ie your assessable case file documents) they should be posted in here. Your opposing team will then collect the document from here and prepare their response. By the relevant date, the response shall also have been filed. Like a normal Court, documents must be filed on time. The deadline is 6pm on the day the document is due. If the document is not filed on time, the entire group gets ZERO for the item (but must still complete it so the case can continue). For this to work, everyone must take responsibility and ensure the deadlines are met.

- *what are some of the ways of meeting examination and student assessment requirements in technology-enabled flexible courses ?*

In the *Civil Practice* example above, it is clearly impossible for one instructor to read and judge the worth of each discussion contribution for assessment purposes. Instead, for the final assessment at the end of the mock case, students were asked to look back over their respective contributions and determine which four were the most important. They were then asked to write a brief account of the value of the contribution made by these four postings to the overall outcome of the 'case'. This account was then submitted for assessment. This leads to both a manageable load for the instructor and an obligation on students to develop valuable self-analysis and reflective skills.

A major review workshop held toward the end of the project addressed assessment issues. Early successes and practical options for the future identified by instructors included:

- Can we make greater use of the *WebCT* quiz tool by, for example, allocating students so many hours for an exam preview period starting as soon as they access and download the questions, and requiring answers to be submitted by the end of the designated period? This approach has the advantage that it would not require students to stay logged on while addressing themselves to the questions.
- Can we make more extensive use of the proven 1:1 telephone interview system? Students like the telephone communication – it offers opportunities for:
  - better instructor-student interaction and more immediate feedback than occurs when marking written work
  - students to enhance their performance skills in interviewing, negotiation, advocacy
  - students to raise other concerns on a needs basis – eg admission, job search, etc

  While sometimes seen as time-consuming for instructors telephone interviews may not be much worse than traditional marking.
- Project work involving team and group work encourages student interaction skills, and is valued by employers. Students work together and produce a group report that attracts a single shared mark. In order to minimise the

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perennial 'freeloader' problem they are asked to submit individual critiques on this product (eg in the form of a succinct 'internal' memo to a 'boss' in a fictitious firm). This has the additional benefit that it encourages individuals to reflect on the group process. When designed well, group work has the potential to both broaden the skills learned and save marking time.

- *what role is played by team- or group-work in the course design and development process and how is this best facilitated?*

Prior to the commencement of this project, instructors who were rethinking curricula and undertaking course development did not necessarily work in a group or team-based fashion. Usually, courses have been taught by one (sometimes two) instructors and, subject to meeting Law profession requirements and expectations, course development proceeded within the relatively private domain of the relevant individual(s).

Our experience indicates that, with the transition to a technology-mediated study program, the curriculum design and development process increasingly involved more and more people. Structured and semi-structured discussion and dialogue has played a central role in the rethinking process. Discussion between a range of different players: between different instructors; between instructors and CEDAM consultants; between instructors and support staff responsible for management of student administration data; and between instructors, technical staff and CEDAM consultants. The systematic use of discussion and dialogue in this way is in accord with others' experiences and widely reported in the literature (eg. Schon, 1990; Laurillard, 1993; Brockbank and McGill, 1998). Schon's concept of reflection-in action, in particular, has informed the dialogue and underpinned much of the interaction between CEDAM consultants and LW participants.

Toward the end of the project the consolidation of team-based approaches to support the process of course design and development appears to be happening in an increasingly explicit and autonomous fashion (ie independent of any CEDAM input). Embryonic, self-organising groups of 2 or 3 individuals, for example, have embarked on at least two different course designs and development initiatives in the latter part of 2001. Team approaches may prove to be a key component of the emerging 'course development culture' within LW as experience mounts with the iterative process of rethinking associated with technology-mediated course design, development and provision

> 'The common interest in *WebCT* has given us a context in which to talk more about our individuals courses and identify group issues. A good atmosphere is developing involving showing what you can do and sharing options, with people readily adapting approaches from someone else's course and applying it to their own. Inevitably, approaches are put together in different ways in different courses – in ways suited to each context.' (Director, LW, 2002)

Some additional observations and findings

The experience of this project has also demonstrated that:

- a strategic leadership commitment is required from those responsible for managing degree and study programs in order to achieve such a sustained effort

> 'You can't get whole programs to change without this level of commitment. Individual courses can be changed in a comparatively straightforward way. Whole-of-program change of this sort needs a different approach – for example, the one described here.' (Director, LW, 2002)

- a campus commitment to strengthening technological infrastructure (eg installing *WebCT*) is an essential prerequisite – and an ideal trigger - for the sort of course and curriculum design rethinking (and associated course development initiatives) described here
- the transition to technology-enabled off-campus study leads to a substantial shift in instructor focus from curriculum content to process
- off-campus students need explicit support structures and communications. Students need an induction into program and course expectations: an overview of what the course is about, what they need to do and when, and what comprises the assessment.

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- appropriate means for acquiring student feedback can involve use of telephone interviews and/or use of web-based open ended questions centred around: What worked well? What needs improvement? Answers to these questions can then be logged and managed in a small database.
- a distributed approach to the educational development (coaching) support can be highly effective (eg through an individual coach/consultant based in CEDAM but with specific area-based responsibilities – in this case Legal Workshop). Such support can be achieved with a junior position, where it proves possible to attract, identify and appoint an appropriate individual.
- a 'coach the coach' approach to support for the project officer within CEDAM appears to be essential in order to minimise the opportunities for the day-to-day 'rough and tumble' of the job to get out of hand. It also enables the capture of valuable 'institutional learning' outcomes

> 'We could not have achieved our current level of success in the transition to web-based delivery without this kind of support. It allowed us to help staff through the intellectual and cultural change, and saved us from foisting unworkable courses on students.' (Director, LW, 2002)

A wide range of ongoing issues remain. Those concerning the rethinking of curriculum include:

- determining practical and timely ways to keep abreast of new and successful teaching approaches being developed in the context of web-enabled off-campus course delivery
- how to assist instructors to find time for the continued ongoing course design and redesign, and student activity planning work
- the desire to streamline the assignment submission process using *WebCT* tools
- identifying what additional skills instructors can/should develop either individually or as a team in order to continue to strengthen the program

Concluding discussion

The project experience described here is in broad accord with that articulated in the opening quote by the US Council of Graduate Schools. The shared approach to project leadership involving both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' strategies accords with Johnson's (1997) recommendations about the requirements for effective educational change. Quality of the student learning experience was maintained by:

- developing and engaging in a group or peer 'review' process of curriculum redesign and teaching review;
- acquiring, interpreting and acting on student feedback in a timely way; and
- using external facilitation by educational development staff to support these two processes.

A sustained commitment to an evidence-based approach to course redesign and redevelopment was achieved. Cyclically acquiring, interpreting and acting on student feedback enabled the transition to a successful technology-enabled curriculum to be achieved over just three or four iterations of course design, development and implementation. Given the magnitude of the conceptual change demanded of teachers undertaking such ventures, we suggest this is a very reasonable number of re-development cycles.

Provocatively, our experience suggests that the use of an internal consultant working as a 'coach' (and supported by an appropriate 'coach the coach' process) is a cost-effective means to support the demands to rethink curriculum. At first glance, this is a counter-intuitive outcome. However, when we consider what is now known about the nature of 'deep' learning (eg Biggs, 1999), and the central role played by conversation and dialogue in achieving conceptual change, and the importance of conceptual change to the curriculum rethinking process, then this is not necessarily an unexpected outcome after all. Perhaps the real issue concerns the extent to which it proves necessary (or not) to continue to provide external consulting support now the transition is mostly complete. Equally important is the question of how flexible a course should be: When is a course in danger of becoming too many things to too many people? At this stage it is still too early to offer an evidence-based opinion on these important points.

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